

Hezbollah Faces Domestic Challenges with Self-Confidence

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With Lebanon in a state of crisis, Hezbollah is acting determinedly and using all the means at its disposal to prevent a decline in its status. The struggle is currently focusing on the investigation into the explosion in Beirut Port in August 2020. Hezbollah seeks to obstruct this investigation, because it fears that it will be blamed; for their part, Hezbollah's opponents are attempting to preserve the independence of Lebanon's legal system. This is the background to the violent clash that broke out in Beirut on October 14, 2021 during a demonstration by Hezbollah and Amal members. The demonstrators demanded the dismissal of the judge appointed to head the investigation; the judge, meantime seeks to complete the investigation, despite the threats against him. This struggle, a test of Hezbollah's power to impose its views and to control the Lebanese system, is accompanied by sectoral friction, because Hezbollah alleges that those responsible for shooting during the demonstration are members of the small Christian party of Samir Geagea, who denies this. The judge himself, a Catholic Christian, is currently supported by incoming Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati and a majority of the Christians, including Nasrallah's Maronite Christian allies, among them Lebanese President Michel Aoun.

The violent clash in Beirut on October 14, 2021, in which seven people were killed (three Hezbollah members, three members of the Amal movement, and a passerby) and dozens wounded (some of them passersby) is further evidence of the internal challenges facing Hezbollah in maintaining its independence and dominant status in the Lebanese system, which is currently engulfed in an extremely severe crisis. Hezbollah, seeking to block the continuation of the investigation into the deadly and destructive explosion in Beirut Port in August 2020, sent its activists, together with Amal members, for a demonstration of force in the city streets in what was labeled a "peaceful demonstration."

The demonstrators were demanding the removal of investigative Judge Tarek Bitar. Bitar, appointed in February following the resignation of his predecessor, has displayed determination and persistence in the investigation, and the threats against him have not deterred him from summoning senior Lebanese leaders for questioning. The protest march, which was held in the border area between the Christian and Shiite neighborhoods in the Lebanese capital, was met by sniper fire from the roofs, leading to exchanges of fire and a street battle in the peaceful neighborhood. Hezbollah quickly accused members of Samir Geagea's Christian Lebanese Forces Party of beginning the shooting, and has conducted a campaign of slander and threats against Geagea since the event. Geagea denies that his men were involved in the event in any way. Calm was restored after involvement by Lebanese Army forces, which also arrested suspects in the shooting.

Hezbollah initiated the provocative demonstration against what it called the "biased judicial authority" because it was concerned that under the leadership of Bitar, who is demonstrating courage and independence, the investigation would lead to its incrimination as the party responsible for the explosion. Hezbollah therefore made the removal of Bitar a primary political goal, after having previously brought about the dismissal of Fadi Sawan, the first investigator in the case. In a speech on October 11, Nasrallah stated that Judge Bitar was tainted with ulterior motives, and that it was therefore imperative to replace him. In another speech on October 18, Nasrallah described the killing of the demonstrators as a turning point in the internal developments in Lebanon, and severely attacked Geagea's party for what he alleged was its responsibility for the deaths. Nasrallah said that this would lead to a civil war in Lebanon that would change the country's demography and threaten all of the Christians in Lebanon. Nasrallah's speech was notable for its veiled threat that Hezbollah would use force, although it did not wish to do so. He referred to the power of his organization, which has 100,000 well-trained soldiers at its disposal "capable of moving mountains," compared with the 15,000 soldiers boasted by Geagea.

Hezbollah's actions concerning the investigation, and especially its contribution to the violent outbreak of October 14, have aroused bloody memories of the second Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) among residents of Beirut, and have motivated Hezbollah's opponents to come to Bitar's defense. The conflict joins a number of other recent clashes that exposed the growing internal criticism of Hezbollah among the Lebanese public and the sectoral friction in the country. Most of this criticism is aimed at the organization's independent policy, dominant status, and role in the downward spiral in Lebanon, which is experiencing its worst crisis in its history. For example, expressions of hostility to Hezbollah were revealed in a planned attack by Sunnis against Hezbollah members during the funeral of a victim of a blood feud in Khalde in July. Another example is the violent reaction of Druze residents of the village of Chouya on August 6 against members of a Hezbollah squad that launched rockets at Israel from a site close to the village. The Druze villagers accused Hezbollah of exposing their village to Israeli attack.

Hezbollah, which is also affected by the political-economic-health crisis in Lebanon, currently avoids the use of military force to deter its opponents as much as possible. This is in stark contrast to its policy in the 2008 crisis, when Hezbollah initiated bloody riots in Beirut in order to overturn government decisions that ran counter to its interests. At this stage, as long as there is no threat to its leading status in the internal order, Hezbollah wants to preserve the status quo, and utilizes mainly political manipulations and media campaigns, together with mafia tactics of threats and intimidation, and if necessary, the murder of its opponents. Thus far, Hezbollah has left the Lebanese army to restore order to the streets of Lebanon.

At the same time, even Hezbollah's activity ostensibly conducted for the good of the Lebanese population has not escaped criticism, for example, the independent entry of gasoline and fuel oil from Iran, which began on September 16, with no official Lebanese control. The arrival of the gasoline, desperately needed by a Lebanon left in darkness, was

accompanied by celebrations on the part of the Shiite population, the main beneficiary of the Iranian gasoline. It aroused criticism, however, including by Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who complained about the violation of Lebanese sovereignty. There is also growing criticism of Hezbollah because of the friction that it creates with Israel, which undermines Hezbollah's argument that its military power is aimed at defending Lebanon from Israel.

The current battle for the independence of the legal system in the investigation of the attack at Beirut Port amounts to a last stand for Hezbollah's opponents and an important test for those seeking to challenge the organization's status and its influence, under Iranian sponsorship, on Lebanon's future. To a large extent, Hezbollah has the ability to decide whether to lead Lebanon into internal chaos and another civil war, although events can also escape its control. At this stage, it is difficult to assess whether the fragile calm prevailing in Beirut's streets since the October 14 clash will continue for long, since Hezbollah will not remain inactive; it will continue its efforts to oust Judge Bitar, including heavy pressure on its political partners to withdraw their opposition to this measure. Publicly, Hezbollah will seek to calm the situation and adopt a statesmanlike position in support of the right to demonstrate, while demanding that the investigation be untainted by the judge's allegedly political considerations. In practice, the organization will thwart the investigation and keep its distance from the accusations by using its connections and political influence on the one hand and demonstrating its military capabilities in order to attain its goals on the other. Hezbollah also will not shy away from using violence against its opponents in the rival camp, as it has done in the past. Hezbollah did not hesitate to clandestinely attack rival political leaders, such as Prime Minister Saad Hariri in 2005, and its opponents, such as journalist Luqman Salim in February 2021, for which it has not had to pay a price.

For its part, Israel should continue monitoring the events in Lebanon without intervening, and remain alert to the possibility that the growing criticism of Hezbollah in Lebanon is liable to lead the organization to

adopt extreme measures, extending to the use of military capabilities and an attempt to take over Lebanon by force. In an equally grave scenario, Hezbollah may decide on escalation on the border with Israel in order to divert Lebanese attention away from the organization.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen